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AUTHOR Selman, Mary; Blackwell, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

A community-based program for adults learning English as a second language has been carried out by Vancouver Community College in British Columbia. The program, known as Neighborhood English Classes of the college, offers classes at accessible locations in the community to serve immigrants who are unable or unwilling to attend the intensive program at King Edward Campus or its night centers. Three distinct types of classes are offered: classes for seniors, adult evening classes, and the "moms and tots" classes. The origins and development of the program are discussed. Based on a survey of students, information is provided on the following characteristics: education, language and cultural background, length of residence Canada, social role responsibilities, and personal characteristics. Special demands of the teaching situation are outlined. Monthly teacher workshops are held to develop good morale and growth in the quality of the program. Teaching techniques and content selections appropriate for the students are discussed. (SW)

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E.S.L. A COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM

Mary Selman
Margaret Blackwell

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The objective of this paper is to describe an ongoing community-based E.S.L. program for adults. The program to be discussed has been known as the Neighbourhood English Classes of Vancouver Community College. Classes are located at accessible points in the communities they serve, such as in community centres, elementary schools, and church basements in order to serve immigrants who are unable or unwilling to attend the intensive E.S.L. programs at King Edward Campus of Vancouver Community College or its night school centres. These individuals are generally women with home responsibilities, senior citizens, or adults with working responsibilities. Three distinct types of classes are offered: classes for seniors, adult evening classes, and the Moms and Tots classes. The supporting nursery program in the latter classes serves to expose the pre-schooler to English before entry into the school system.

By presenting the Vancouver program as a reference point and a successful example, we hope to encourage the adoption of community-based programs in other urban centres. Already, adult education planners, in cooperation with the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, have initiated programs of their own in other B.C. centres, some examples being Victoria, Kamloops, Prince Rupert, Merritt, Squamish, Abbotsford and North Vancouver.

The Development of the Program

The origins of the Neighbourhood English Classes lie in the recognition in 1971 of the language learning needs of older immigrants and immigrant women with families. Vancouver Community College launched classes for seniors in 1971, and for mothers and pre-schoolers in 1972. The program for seniors developed as a result of active community work and classes were formed for seniors in six community centres. The Mothers and Tots program began in early 1972 with a class largely made up of Greek women at General

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Gordon Elementary School. Subsequently, two others opened in elementary schools. The combination of these programs resulted in the formation of the Community Program, later renamed the Neighbourhood English Classes.

By June 1974, the number of classes had grown to 19. The appointment of a full time coordinator in September 1974 made even more rapid development possible. By September 1975 sixty classes were scheduled. Unfortunately Vancouver Community College budget cutbacks necessitated a one-third reduction in this number. From September to May 1975-76, there were 43 classes, 38 of which were Moms and Tots. The balance were either classes for seniors or for adults. The highest enrollment attained in 1976 was over 800 adults and some 220 children in the "tots" side of the program. Average class size for the adults was 16 to 18 students.

Whereas considerable development work is usually necessary to establish new classes, the opening of the Britannia Centre in an area of Vancouver which has very large Chinese and Italian populations, readily attracted many students. Britannia, which is a unique complex in North America, integrates educational, recreational and welfare services. It has readily focused the attention and involvement of its community. Its emphasis on responding to community need as well as relying on community participation has fostered rapid growth in English classes in that location.

More recent history of the Neighbourhood English Classes has been very discouraging. Further budget cutbacks caused the King Edward Campus of V.C.C. to virtually give up its commitment to outreach and pass responsibility for the program to the Community Education Services. This body is seeking to maintain it on a cost recoverable basis. This change has resulted in a 50% reduction in the numbers of classes offered. All students now have to pay fees, whereas previously the Moms & Tots classes were free.

From this brief review of the history of this community-based education, it can clearly be seen that the need for such programs does exist and that attention must be paid not only to those who line up for places in our institutions, but also to these less

visible, less articulate students. Their need is no smaller for being less apparent.

Educational and Social Philosophies of the Community-Based Program

The Neighbourhood English Classes program has been seen by its coordinator as a community-education project. As such, attempts have been made to sound out the nature of the communities served and to investigate the physical, social, and institutional characteristics of the ethnic communities and socio-geographic districts of the greater Vancouver area (i.e. Chinatown, Grandview-Woodlands, and Kitsilano) and the related language learning needs of its residents. Many of the decisions about the program and recommendations for teaching methodology have been based on a knowledge of these communities. For example, when it became apparent that very few Portuguese immigrants in the city were attending either the institutionally-based program at the main college or classes at the local community centre, a class was started at a local parish for Portuguese people. An overwhelming turnout of 85 students at the first English language class at Our Lady of Fatima was the result. Though less spectacular in numbers, the response at the Italian, Our Lady of Sorrows was very positive. Currently, plans are underway to organize a class within a Chinese social agency, SUCCESS, which has a storefront operation in Chinatown. The classes often are established on the basis of requests from the community itself. The request may come from potential students, school personnel, or community development workers.

Due to the social and personal characteristics of the students, the program often requires a community development approach to reach would-be students and encourage them to become involved in English classes. Publicity has been translated into Chinese, Punjabi, Italian, Greek, Serbo-Croatian and Korean. Ethnic publications and radio stations provide information about the locations and scheduling and some of the features of the classes, such as the free baby-sitting in the Moms and Tots classes. Special channels for publicity i.e., through the public health nurses and the learning assistance program with the Vancouver School Board have been utilized. Ethnic

workers have been actively involved with the East Indian community, drawing in otherwise reluctant students to the classes. Vancouver Community College, along with other educational personnel, participates in an ethnically sponsored organization to coordinate English language instruction for the Chinatown residents. The College already has a long tradition of serving this community through School Canadiana which offers more intensive classes for Chinese speakers. The Britannia Centre actively participates in the promotion of E.S.L. classes because the need for them is seen to be one of the most basic in the surrounding community. The Immigrant Women's Advocate Committee, a group of professionals who have taken on the responsibility of articulating politically the concerns of immigrant women, has shown a special interest in the program also.

While the administration of the program is basically the responsibility of Vancouver Community College, other institutions are actively involved, and they cooperate with college personnel in basic decision-making about the program. Immigrant Services Society shares some of the funding, paying most of the cost of student fees and the babysitting in the Moms and Tots classes. Personnel based at the locations such as community centres, elementary schools and churches are consulted about classroom availability and the scheduling of classes, and can actively influence the type of class offered on their premises. In addition, an on-going liaison with affiliated organizations such as multilingual service agencies and ethnic social agencies is carried out. Maintaining cooperation and communication between the participating organizations is an important aspect of administering a vital community program from an institutional base.

The involved institutions each have their own emphasis and perspective on what the purpose of the program actually is. Vancouver Community College sees the program as an 'outreach' program, serving a public relations role with the ethnic communities and providing service for the total range of E.S.L. needs in the Vancouver area. However, once budget cuts were made in the summer of 1976, the program was defined as peripheral to the operation of the English Language Training division of the college and the program was transferred to another division of the college.

Immigrant Services Society sees the program as having an important role in immigrant adjustment. Potential problems such as the isolation of the woman in the home and ethnic group, and the breakdown of communication between parents and children within the family, might be ameliorated by mothers learning English. Contacts with social institutions such as the school can be encouraged. Immigrant Services recognizes the need for special services to mothers. However, its policy is to extend the learning opportunities to as large a number of women as possible, rather than providing more intensive classes for a smaller group of individuals.

The neighbourhood base provides inherent educational and social value to the typical student in the English class. The program removes many of the physical and psychological barriers faced in learning English in a formal institutional setting. The community locations provide easy access to the woman with home responsibilities, the senior citizen who is reluctant to venture too far from home, and the adult who works long daytime or shift hours.

The costs of the program are minimal. Often the classes are within walking distance and the program provides free babysitting for mothers with pre-schoolers. Fees for mothers in the Moms and Tots classes and for senior citizens before reorganization, were paid by sponsoring organizations. There is often no money in the family for student fees, either due to financial reasons or to the low priority put on mother's education in the family budget. Now, however a small tuition fee is being charged to the students.

Classes are scheduled to fit in with the home responsibilities of women in the Moms and Tots classes and the adult evening classes are timed to consider both the working and domestic demands placed on working adults.

The psychological advantages to participating in an educational activity in the home community are many. Students are more inclined to attend classes in an institution with which they are already familiar. They are likely to have more confidence in their own ethnic and socioeconomic group, and, in the Moms and Tots classes, with other women. An informal social atmosphere is encouraged to develop confidence and promote friendships among the students.

The content of the classes is related to the immediate social needs of the women in the context of the local community, for example calling an English speaking doctor for an appointment and mailing a parcel at the post office. An emphasis is placed on acquiring knowledge about the local resources and how to use them. Often there is no parallel in the native country to the complex services such as the public library and the community centre. Language instruction related to the immediate needs of the students has the dual advantage of building on previous learning about the local environment and providing motivation for the student to widen his/her physical and social environment to the city at large and to deal with large-scale institutions such as educational and governmental services.

Social and Personal Characteristics of the Target Population

The students of the Neighbourhood English Classes bring widely varied backgrounds and experiences to their English class. Demographic information about the N.E.C. students was collected in the winter of 1976, and some significant conclusions can be drawn.

Education: A wide range of formal education is apparent. A sizeable number of students (10.7%) have had either no education in their homeland or less than three years of schooling. These students have to be considered functionally illiterate in their own language and require basic literacy skills as well as English instruction. In addition, they require some basic 'learning to learn' assistance. There is a large percentage of N.E.C. students (32%) with only four, five or six years of education. Many students in the program come from the southern European countries of Portugal, Italy and Greece, where the basic minimum education is legally established at the fourth, fifth or sixth grade respectively. Immigrants with little formal schooling often have little confidence in their abilities to succeed academically, and consider themselves too old to learn.

On the other hand, there is a sizeable proportion of students (18.7%) who are fairly well educated (12 or more years of schooling). Teachers of these students have to consider their particular learning style as well as unique aspirations for learning English.

Language and Cultural Background: The language background of the N.E.C. students is equally mixed, reflecting the ethnic origins of Vancouver immigrants as a whole. The Chinese are the largest linguistic group, followed by the Italian and then, the East Indian group. Ninety per cent (90%) of the students in the program can be included in three general language and cultural categories: Asian, Southern European, and East Indian. While representatives from other backgrounds do show up in the classes, their numbers are small.

Length of residence in Canada: The statistics on length of residence in Canada speak dramatically of the need for the program. In many cases, immigrant women do not learn the language of the dominant culture and remain isolated in their homes or within the ethnic community. The mother is often considered to have the role of guardian of the native culture, and of the native language in particular. The statistics are striking: almost fifty per cent (50%) of N.E.C. students have been in Canada for over 5 years; over twenty per cent (20%) for more than 10 years; and ten per cent (10%) for more than 15 years. Many of these students still have broken English; the Neighbourhood English Class is often their first English class.

Social Role Responsibilities: While the students are a mixed group of language, cultural, educational and personal experiences, most share the common social role responsibilities of the housewife and mother. Over sixty per cent (60%) have pre-school children or children in elementary school. A large number of mothers in the program are fairly old by Canadian standards, over 40 years of age, reflecting the demographic fact that immigrant women have more children and have them later in life than Canadian women.

While classes are largely oriented to the role responsibilities and perspectives of the immigrant housewife, teachers do have to accommodate the needs and interests of older women, young women without children, senior citizens, and male workers in the adult evening classes.

Personal characteristics: The students typically lack confidence in

their learning abilities. They may consider themselves 'too old' or 'too stupid' to learn. A poor self-concept as a learner may result from a lack of formal educational experience as well as the notion that learning and schooling are primarily a childhood rather than an adult activity. The low priority in the family given to the mother's education may affect her motivation to attend.

The learning style of many students has been acquired in a traditional educational setting. The Chinese, for instance, learn by rote. The students may initially find it hard to adapt to informal classrooms, a young and friendly teacher and innovative techniques of language instruction. Portuguese students, in one class, have made insistent requests for homework and Italian students have openly resisted informal seating arrangements in the classroom. Students who have studied English in their homeland will have had experience largely with the written language and a strong emphasis on grammar. Consequently, they may have fundamental problems in speaking and understanding spoken English.

The rate of language learning is often low due to a number of factors. Older students learn more slowly. Lack of confidence and basic shyness in speaking retards language acquisition. The classes themselves do not promote intensive language learning or put pressure upon the student to advance to a higher level. After class, the student returns to his/her family and language group, and often will not pursue any opportunity to speak English outside of the classroom.

The personal motivations and ambitions of the students are generally low. Their needs and interests are very much tied in with those of their family. Reasons for enrolling in an English class are rarely articulated specifically. Students wish "to learn English" or "to speak good English". Women often gradually become aware of the widening gap that is developing between them and their children. Students may come to classes simply because they are embarrassed in the community by their poor English.

Programming Considerations for a Community-Based E.S.L. Program

Teachers in N.E.C. have extraordinary demands placed on them. They in fact have both educational and social functions that their professional training may not have prepared them for. In the first

place they are asked to teach in a community setting that they may be quite unfamiliar with. They need to 'learn' the communities in which they teach, in order to relate to the students and provide information and contacts their students need. The dimensions of the multilevel class present an unparalleled challenge to develop skills in classroom management. The teacher who has a volunteer needs to learn to use this assistance effectively and must spend time in both training the volunteer and in joint planning with her. She must also persist in the never ending tasks of gathering, adapting and revising audio visual aids and other classroom materials. Some assistance is given by the coordinator, but restrictions on time and budget limit what can be done. Teachers in N.E.C. most commonly teach four or eight hours per week. While this has the advantage of preventing staleness, it also means that the teacher does not have the kind of intensive experience that can contribute to the rapid development of professional proficiency.

Because of these unique demands on the teacher and because she often works without regular contact with other teachers, monthly workshops are held. The object is to upgrade and develop teachers' knowledge and skills, provide opportunity for sharing of techniques and materials, while maintaining a clear view of the goals of the program. Workshops serve to develop good morale and growth in the quality of the program.

A full time coordinator is essential to the management of a program of these dimensions. In brief, the coordinator is responsible for maintaining community liaison, for being a resource to teachers and for providing suitable materials. In addition, she must maintain the focus of the program and further its development. Pilot projects within the context of N.E.C. have been initiated but are not as yet ready for public consideration.

Pedagogical Considerations in a Community-Based Class

In planning both content and techniques, it is important to keep in mind that the individual classes are often selected by students on the basis of the geographical relationship to their homes or the predominant ethnic group of that class. Portuguese, Punjabi and Chinese in particular have frequently sought out their own language

and culture group in choosing an English class. The results are that these classes are usually multi-level in nature. This characteristic requires extraordinary skill on the part of the teacher and some forbearance and group sense on the part of the students. The teacher needs to develop both total group and small group techniques in order to meet the needs of all of the students. In effect she can focus on one subject and develop her questioning techniques and class activities at two or even three levels of complexity. For the beginning ESL student she has to deal with the concrete and immediate and extend to the more abstract and distant with appropriate grammatical structures for the more advanced student. The topic, a matter of importance to the student, can have complexities added or deleted depending on the level of the students. For example, if the subject is making a medical appointment, the beginner can be satisfied to learn to make a request and agree on a date and time. For a more advanced group all kinds of road blocks can be thrown in the way. For example, the doctor can be out of town or the patient may need an emergency appointment.

While the beginner is learning to combine adjectives with nouns e.g. "I'd like that blue shirt", the advanced student may use the same sentence and be required to add prepositional phrases and relative clauses e.g. "I'd like that blue and yellow shirt I saw in your window last week". These examples are extreme. There is of course middle ground between the two.

Another example is that of the beginner making simple commands, statements or questions and the more advanced students practising reported speech. For example, the beginner in the medical situation above may say "Can you come at ten?" The advanced student could report the receptionist's enquiry to a third party.

Content The selection of relevant content needs to be made by the teacher in the light of the characteristics of her students. The content has value in itself since it provides the student with important information that is difficult for non-English speakers to obtain. It is also useful as a vehicle for language instruction. It is far better to use topics related to daily survival such as dealing with the bus system or their child's teacher than subjects

often used in pre-packaged English language courses which bear little or no relevance to the lives and needs of students.

Content selections are also made on the basis of cultural differences. This important aspect of adjustment to and understanding of a new society is an important part of English classes. Topics range from simple customs related to festivals and celebrations to the subtleties of roles and relationships. In addition, topics related to socializing at all levels of formality and informality, are important in these classes as they aid in the immigrant's adjustment to the Canadian milieu.

Techniques

Communication is the basic goal in establishing teaching techniques. Many students need to develop confidence to use the language. The instructor, therefore, needs to plan her program and adapt her goals to that end. Specifically, if communication is that goal, she may have to adapt her techniques and standards of error correction. It is a case of resisting "over-correcting" when the students' grammatical aspirations are limited but the communication is clear. The students' goals may rise with time, increased experience, and concomitant development of confidence. When that happy day arrives, the teacher too can raise her linguistic sights for the student.

Neighbourhood classes need to rely heavily on techniques such as games, role plays, field trips and handcrafts that will both give the students language practice in an informal situation, and also draw on their life experience and knowledge. Such techniques involve the student, make use of his capabilities, and enhance the formation of social relationships in the class.

Class Visitors from the community can serve as preparation for a field trip and also help to give the students a feeling of recognition by others in their neighbourhood. For example a visit from the public health nurse can provide for the beginning of a relationship with the local nurse as well as an opportunity to obtain vital public health information about such things as birth control, drugs and diet. The general public finds easy access to this type of information whereas those with very limited knowledge of English do not, and may not even

know that it is provided free of charge to the community.

An important aspect of the Moms and Tots classes is the emphasis on mother and child activities. There is psychological value in the two joining in songs and games in English. The mothers can learn to tell or read stories and nursery rhymes to their children which are, in effect, readiness activities for children entering Canadian schools. These classes provide exposure for Canadian customs and for attitudes to the teacher and the school. Cultural differences in these areas often present a major hurdle for parents and can be a serious point of conflict between parent and child. Many parents from other cultures find Canadian informality and our early independence training a new and frightening prospect. While no attempt should be made to "convert" students to Canadian attitudes, they are entitled to opportunities to observe and discuss their existence. Typically mothers either enjoy the mother and child activities very much or resist them. Perhaps one reason lies in a feeling that they need the opportunity to be relieved of their mothering responsibilities occasionally and tend to their own needs.

Conclusion

The values of community-based English classes accrue to both the individual and the society at large. For the student, a new opportunity for self realization through broader community contacts and participation is made possible. Many immigrants feel that they have come to Canada for their children's benefit. Classes such as these do much to introduce them to the possibilities for themselves as well. The first step out of their own ethnic groups may be one that will lead them to more intensive classes and fuller citizen participation.

The social benefits that may come from a community-based program that reaches students who otherwise do not attend English classes are several. They can contribute to better communication within the family and with social institutions. The classes may promote interaction between ethnic groups and hopefully reduce potential conflict. Community based classes can concern themselves with the 'total student' attending to both his personal and vocational aspirations. For many of the students in these classes, who have had little opportunity for personal growth, this may be a first step in a new direction.

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